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ABSTRACT

This evaluative survey of the telephone information service of the New York City Regional Center for Life-Long Learning used a brief survey questionnaire whose design was provided by the information solicited from the users during their initial telephone contact with the Center. The questionnaire focused on the following questions: (1) Who are the users of the service? (2) What are their reasons for continuing their education? (3) How helpful did they find the service? and (4) How can the service be improved? Of the 558 questionnaires sent, 221 usable questionnaires were returned, 40 percent of the total sample. The completed questionnaires were coded and the data analyzed by computer. The survey findings are presented in four major sections: (1) a statistical profile of users; (2) analysis of user learning interests and reaction to telephone service; (3) cross-tabular data by user age and ethnic background; and (4) user suggestions for improving the Center's information service. The research identified a number of problem areas and the six recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the Center's telephone information service are the result. The questionnaire is appended. (Author/BP)

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Center Research Report No. 7

EVALUATION OF TELEPHONE INFORMATION SERVICE OF NEW YORK CITY REGIONAL CENTER FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING

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1974

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Preface

This survey was begun in spring, 1974, as a class project by three Teachers College graduate students, who were enrolled at the time in a graduate course entitled "Continuing Education in Colleges, Universities and Professional Schools." The students, Rudolph A. Cain, chairman of the Evaluation Team, Ione Graves, and Panay Reyes conducted the study under the general supervision of their instructor, Professor Gordon Darkenwald, a member of the Regional Center Task Force (1973-74). Mr. Ronald Miller, Project Coordinator for the New York City Regional Center for Life-Long Learning was consulted on a regular basis. We wish to thank Mr. Miller and his staff for their cooperation.

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Introduction and Background

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the activities of the New York City Regional Center for Life-Long Learning with regard to the telephone information service initiated by the Center in January, 1974.

The Life-Long Learning Center was established in 1972 under a Title I grant to the Regents Regional Coordinating Council for Post-Secondary Education to serve as a clearinghouse for the collection and dissemination of information about post-secondary opportunities within the five boroughs of New York City. As a clearinghouse, the Center had to tap New York City's myriad of resources to compile a comprehensive directory that would be readily available as a guide and reference to continuing education opportunities in New York City. The directory has been published and distributed to post-secondary institutions throughout the city.

The proposal for the establishment of the Center for Life-Long Learning states in definitive terms that the information service is intended for the special needs of the adult residents of New York City and that the ultimate goal is to "provide disadvantaged adults with information about the availability of post-secondary educational opportunities and to encourage them to seek learning appropriate to their needs."

Publicity regarding the Center for Life-Long Learning telephone service was channeled through three publications, the New York Times (Education Section), the Amsterdam News (a Black weekly) and the Civil Service Bulletin. Subsequently, the Center began functioning as a telephone information service in January, 1974.

The Evaluation Team acknowledges the value of the directory prepared by the Center in providing information to the public. The directory lists

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programs, courses, and post-secondary institutions and is designed to enable telephone operators to answer inquiries promptly and efficiently. Personal data on the user, learning interests and other pertinent information is recorded by the operator and referred to staff personnel who use the directory as a guide in providing the information sought. The information requested is either conveyed immediately to the caller or mailed.

Our goals were to describe those who sought assistance from the Center, to determine the range of interests and motivations, and to assess degree of satisfaction with the service. We also solicited suggestions from the users on how the service might be improved. Though occasional references are made to organizational and administrative problem areas, as they relate to our findings, the focus of this report is not on the organizational and administrative structure of the Center.

The recommendations made at the conclusion of this report will hopefully serve to strengthen the Center's information dissemination efforts.

Methodology of the Evaluation

The Evaluation Team initially visited the facility in February, 1974 to observe the overall operation and to interview the staff. Located in rather small shared quarters at Pace University, the telephone referral service operates from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays. The staff of six to seven student employees manning the telephones reported that calls were particularly heavy (at least a couple of hundred) during the first few days following the publicity releases. However, telephone inquiries have tappered-off considerably, probably due to the lack of an on-going publicity campaign. Plans for an ad campaign utilizing Spanish radio

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stations and Spanish dailies were cancelled because the Center lacked Spanish-speaking operators to accommodate callers.

The information solicited from the users during their initial telephone contact with the Center provided the basis for the design of a brief survey questionnaire (see Appendix for copy). The questionnaire focused on the following questions:

1. Who are the users of the service?
2. What are their reasons for continuing their education?
3. How helpful did they find the service?
4. How can the service be improved?

The questionnaire, accompanied by a covering letter signed by the Project Coordinator, Mr. Ronald Miller, and a pre-addressed return envelope, was mailed to the 558 callers who used the telephone service in January and for whom complete addresses were available. Originally, the questionnaires were coded in order to follow-up on non-respondents. However, the coding identification was deleted by the Center's staff without the prior knowledge of the Evaluation Team, precluding plans for a targeted follow-up of non-respondents. Because we did not know who the non-respondents were, it was necessary to send a second mailing to all 558 individuals in the original sample. Roughly 160 of these individuals had already returned completed questionnaires. Consequently, the second cover letter could not make a strong "pitch" to non-respondents because of the risk of offending those who had responded. Not surprisingly, the results of the follow-up mailing were disappointing; despite a bland cover letter thanking those who had responded and asking them to disregard the second appeal, we received many irate responses from people who had already returned questionnaires.

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Usable questionnaires were returned by 221 individuals, 40 percent of the total sample. This is about an average response rate for a mailed questionnaire, but less than we might have achieved. Because of the possibility of significant non-response bias, generalizations to the entire population of telephone service users must be considered tentative. We do not, however, have any reason to suspect that our 221 respondents differ in any appreciable way from the total population of users.

The completed questionnaires were coded, key punched and verified, and the data analyzed by computer. Inductive coding schemes were developed for the open-ended items. Following several practice sessions, the Evaluation Team met as a group to code all questionnaires. This procedure served to increase coding reliability by consensual resolution of ambiguities. Frequency and percentage distributions and cross-tabulations of key variables were generated by computer program. Statistical significance was determined by the Chi Square test.

Results

The survey findings are presented in four sections: 1) statistical profile of users; 2) analysis of user reaction to telephone service; 3) cross-tabular data by user age and ethnic background; and 4) user suggestions for improving the Center's information service.

Profile of Users

The findings in Table 1 constitute a statistical portrait of our sample of users. The reader might critically examine these data in view of the "ultimate" population, that is, the disadvantaged adult, to be served by the Center.

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Table 1

User Profile: Percentage Distributions
for Background Variables
(N=217)

Variable	Categories	Percent
Age	17-29	30.8
	30-49	40.7
	50-78	28.5
Sex	Male	39.6
	Female	60.4
Ethnic Background	Black	17.1
	Hispanic	7.1
	White	72.5
	Other	3.3
Educational Level	8th Grade	1.4
	1-3 Yrs. High School	8.8
	High School Grad.	23.5
	1-3 Yrs. College	22.6
	College Grad.	18.9
	Graduate Degree	24.9
Occupation	Prof./Managerial	33.0
	Clerical/Sales	20.5
	Service	7.4
	Skilled/Semi-Skilled	6.0
	Unskilled	2.3
	Homemaker	11.2
	Unemployed	5.1
	Other	14.4

The socio-economic characteristics of the sample in terms of a composite look at race, educational and occupational level strongly suggest that those seeking assistance were not disadvantaged by any commonly accepted definition of the term. The educational level of the sample is extraordinarily high. Two-thirds of the sample have had some college and the largest or modal group (24.9%) hold graduate degrees: The typical respondent might be characterized as a middle aged white

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woman who has had some college and is employed as a white collar worker. The fact that a third of the sample were classified as professionals or managers is also astonishing, although totally consonant with the reported high level of educational attainment. Racial/ethnic minorities, not surprisingly, are underrepresented in proportion to their numbers in the total adult population of New York City. Women also outnumber men to a considerable extent, a finding that is not easy to account for given the fact that most studies of participation in adult education report a roughly equal ratio.*

The evaluators believe that the limited and selective nature of the publicity campaign may have been a crucial factor in determining the skewness of the sample. Moreover, mass media publicity has been shown in many studies to be ineffectual in reaching educationally and economically disadvantaged adults. To reach this segment of the population, it is generally necessary to work through grassroots community organizations such as anti-poverty groups and churches.

Table 1 tends to obscure the fact that older persons are not being reached by the Center. Although 28.5 percent of our sample fall within the age range of 50-78, fewer than 10 percent of users were 60 years of age or older.

User Learning Interests and
Reactions to Telephone Service

The motivations and interests of the users and their satisfaction with the service provided by the Center for Life-Long Learning can be extrapolated from Table 2. Job advancement ("get a better job or

*See, for example, the most recent comprehensive national survey of adult learning interests reported in K. Patricia Cross and John R. Valley, Planning Non-Traditional Programs (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974).

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advance in present job") appears to be the single most important reason why people seek assistance from the Center concerning post-secondary educational opportunities. It is noteworthy that while almost one-third of our respondents selected job advancement as their main reason for "taking advantage of adult educational opportunities," only 16.3 percent indicated interest in obtaining formal credentialing, that is a diploma or degree.* This finding is consistent with the earlier observation regarding the high level of educational attainment of the sample.

Table 2

User Learning Interests and
Reactions to Telephone Service

Variable	Categories	Percent
Reason for Learning (N=221)	Job Advancement	30.8
	Leisure Activity	8.6
	Diploma/Degree	16.3
	Learning's Sake	23.1
	Info. on Specific Course/Program	1.4
	Info. for Organization Use	2.7
	Retirement Related	1.8
	Other	15.4
Did You Contact School? (N=219)	Yes	52.5
	No	47.5
If "Yes" to above, Did You Enroll? (N=124)	Yes	29.8
	No	70.2
Was Information Helpful? (N=204)	Yes	62.7
	No	37.3
If Answer is "No," Why Not? (N=83)	Wrong Information	28.9
	Info. Too General	20.5
	Did Not Receive Information	4.8
	Delay	3.6
	Other	42.2

*About the same percentage nationally who want a diploma, or degree. See Cross and Valley, Non-Traditional Programs, p. 36.

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Although half of the respondents contacted a school "as the result of information provided by the Center," less than a third (29.8) of this group actually enrolled. Whether or not this is a "good batting average" is impossible to say since there is no previous or comparable experience that can serve as a benchmark for comparison.

There appear to be several factors which could have militated against actual enrollment. First, in a significant number of instances the quality of information given to callers left much to be desired. Some callers were referred to institutions that could not meet their needs. Second, callers often had no knowledge of registration dates and such information as admissions requirements, and cost. Even in view of the kinds of problems cited, a majority (62.7%) of the respondents characterized the service provided by the Center as helpful. Of those who did not find the information helpful, about half attributed their dissatisfaction to having been given wrong information or information that was too vague or general. These criticisms certainly raise some questions regarding the adequacy and quality of the information provided, as well as the staff's ability to interpret the needs of the callers. However, it is also important to note that a large proportion (42.2%) of dissatisfied respondents did not validly respond to this item ("please tell us why the information you received was not helpful"). The substance of their comments tended to reflect negatively on the post-secondary institutions and not on the service provided by the Center for Life-Long Learning.

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Cross-Tabulations by
Age and Ethnic Background

A number of cross-tabulations were run in order that we might examine the relationship of user characteristics such as age, race and occupation to such variables as motivation for enrolling and satisfaction with the Center's services. Only those cross-tabulations found to have statistical and practical significance are presented here. It might be noted that sex was unrelated to any behavior or opinion tapped by the questionnaire. Certain categories were collapsed in the cross-tabular analysis to facilitate interpretation of the data.

Table 3 shows the relationship between age, ethnic background and reasons for pursuing adult educational opportunities.

Table 3

Cross-Tabulations of Reasons for Participation by Age and Ethnic Background

	Age (N=199)			Ethnicity (N-221)	
Reason for Participation	18-29	30-49	50+	Minority	White
Job Advancement	35.1	39.5	11.5	43.1	26.8
Leisure Activity	3.5	2.5	21.3	1.7	11.8
Degree/Diploma	26.3	17.3	4.9	31.0	10.5
Learning's Sake	21.1	16.0	34.4	6.9	29.3
Other	14.0	24.7	27.9	17.2	21.6
	$X^2=43.4$, $p<.001$			$X^2=28.9$, $p<.001$	

It is clear from Table 3 that respondents under 50 years of age were more interested in job advancement and credentials, while the 50 and

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older group were more attracted to post-secondary educational programs for the "sake of learning or for self-improvement" or for reasons related to use of leisure time. This is what we might expect and indeed is consistent with past studies which have examined the relationship of age to reasons for participation in adult education.

When we look at the relationship of ethnic background to reasons for participation, we find that minority-group respondents were more concerned with job advancement and credentialing than were whites. This finding is not unexpected considering the high educational level of our white-dominated sample. Although we did not examine the relationship of race to educational and occupational level, it does seem from this table that many of the minority group respondents were relatively disadvantaged occupationally and educationally.

Table 4 shows the relationship of ethnic background to satisfaction with the Center's information service.

Table 4

Cross-Tabulation of Satisfaction
with Service by Ethnic Background
(N=195)

Was Information Helpful?	Ethnic Background	
	Minority	White
Yes	77.8	58.2
No	22.2	41.8

$X^2=5.7$, $p<.05$

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It is certainly intersting that three-fourths of the minority respondents were satisfied with the Center's telephone information service while whites tended to be considerably less satisfied as a group. We would surmise that ethnic differences in satisfaction were due mainly to differences in interests between minorities and whites. It seems probable that the Center was not well equipped to accommodate the large proportion of white users who sought information on more informal (non-credit, non job-related) post-secondary educational opportunities. On the other hand, the Center was apparently better able to meet the demands of minority users for information on vocationally oriented courses and programs and those leading to a high school diploma or college degree. It appears, then, that the Center currently serves two somewhat distinctive populations: those who have not acquired formal educational credentials and who need these credentials for job up-grading, and those who already have educational credentials and satisfactory jobs but who seek to continue their learning for essentially personal growth reasons.

User Suggestions for Improving the Service

The questionnaire attempted to elicit responses on how the Center might improve its services. About 39 percent responded to this item. Responses seemed to cluster into the categories listed below.

1. Need for professional staff, knowledgeable about occupational information and capable of communicating with and accurately interpreting the needs of the callers.

2. More complete and specific information needed. Respondents felt that such information as closing dates for courses and programs, level of difficulty (beginning, advanced, etc.), admissions requirements would be helpful.

3. Inquiries should be answered more promptly.

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4. The Center should expand its publicity efforts to reach a wider segment of the population.

5. The Center should provide counseling for those who require assistance prior to exploring and utilizing available learning resources.

6. Special services should be provided to veterans and the disabled.

Listed below are selected verbatim comments regarding "how the Center might improve its services."

-"Perhaps the schools themselves might get the inquiries and follow-up on the individual."

-"Focus on specific objectives--scope is too broad; else expand resources to cover all objectives."

-"More vocational counseling initially for people who have been out of school many years, and interest and aptitude tests because where aptitudesand interests meet I believe is where the greatest potentials are."

-"You have been most cordial, followed through promptly, and generally conveyed a willingness to be of service."

-"I think this is an excellent service and should be more widely publicized among the young and retirees--Good luck."

-"It would be helpful to have a number of institutions listed from a given area so that the prospective student could select the one best suited to his or her purposes."

Recommendations of Evaluation Team

Our research identified a number of problem areas, all of which are amenable to corrective action. This section highlights the major problems as we see them and sets forth concrete recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the Center's telephone information service.

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	Problem Area	Recommendation
1.	Information too general	Secure more comprehensive and detailed information on continuing education opportunities and develop a more effective format for communicating this information to the public
2.	Need for personal counseling in addition to information on continuing education opportunities.	Identify personnel in institutions throughout the city willing to provide personal assistance and refer callers on the basis of geography and educational interests and background.
3.	Inability of some operators to respond effectively to telephone requests for assistance.	Institute a training program for operators to familiarize them with the range of needs and resources available to meet them.
4.	Great majority of users are middle to upper-middle class in terms of education and occupation. Data showed one-fourth have graduate degrees and 72 percent are white. The disadvantaged are not being reached.	Launch a vigorous effort to reach the educationally and economically disadvantaged through appropriate community channels (e.g., ethnic radio stations, contacts with community agencies, etc.)
5.	Those at higher education and occupation levels, and non-minority users, are less satisfied with the Center's services. They are also more interested in avocational and general non-credit continuing education opportunities.	Make a special effort to secure detailed information on avocational and general non-credit continuing education opportunties and package this information in easily retrievable and communicable form.
6.	Fewer than 10 percent of the users are 60 or older. The Center does not seem to be reaching the aged in proportion to their numbers.	Make a greater effort to reach older adults through contacts with appropriate organizations and agencies, such as Senior Citizens Centers.

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APPENDIX

NEW YORK CITY REGIONAL CENTER
FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING

TELEPHONE INFORMATION SERVICE QUESTIONNAIRE

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1. What is the main reason you reason you want to take advantage of adult educational opportunities? Check only one reason:	a( ) To get a better job or advance in present job b( ) To participate in a stimulating leisure time activity c( ) To work toward a high school diploma or college degree d( ) To learn for the sake of learning or for self-improvement e( ) Other (Please print or type) _____ _____	10
2. Did you contact any school, college, or other institution as a result of the information provided by the Center for Life-Long Learning?	a( ) Yes b( ) No	11
3. If you answered Yes to Question 2, did you enroll for a course or program of studies?	a( ) Yes b( ) No	12
4. Was the information you received from the Center for Life-Long Learning helpful?	a( ) Yes b( ) No	13

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5. If you answered No to Question 4, please tell us why the information you received was not helpful. (please print or type) 14-15 ( )

_____

_____

6. What is your age? _____years 16-17

7. Please indicate your sex. 18

a( ) Male

b( ) Female

8. What is your ethnic background? 19

a( ) Black/Negro/Afro-American

b( ) Puerto Rican American/Hispanic

c( ) White

d( ) Other (please specify)

_____

9. Please indicate the amount of formal education you have completed to date. 20

a( ) 8th grade or less

b( ) 1-3 years of high school

c( ) High school diploma or equivalent

d( ) 1-3 years of college

e( ) 4 years college degree

f( ) Graduate or professional degree (for example, M.A., M.D., J.D.)

10. Please describe briefly the kind of work you do (for example, homemaker, clerk, taxi driver, lawyer, etc.--please print or type) 21-22 ( )

_____

_____

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23-24

( )

11. If you have any suggestions about how the Center might improve its services, pleasenote them below in print or type.

_____

_____

_____

THANK YOU VERY MUCH